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ABSTRACT

This document consists of two papers on theory building from a conference on human resource development (HRD). Both "Theory Building Research in HRD--Pushing the Envelope!" (Richard A. Swanson, Susan A. Lynham, Wendy E. A. Ruona, Richard J. Torraco) and "The Role of Theory Building in Maturing the Human Resource Development Profession" (Susan A. Lynham) explore the increasing importance of theory building in HRD. As an applied discipline, HRD presents the demand of connecting theory, practice and research. A well-constructed theory gives clarity to the complex phenomena underlying HRD by providing a system for understanding its core ideas and interrelationships. The philosophical framework for HRD consists of the following three components: (1) ontology; (2) epistemology; and (3) axiology which interact to form a guiding framework for a congruent and coherent system of thought and practice. The following five steps: (1) recognize that theory is important to the maturity of HRD thought and practice; (2) commit to multiple theory building research paradigms; (3) conduct rigorous and relevant research to support theory building; (4) support theory building efforts and studies; and (5) participate in symposia and forums to synthesize knowledge and efforts will help to make for more professional and mature thought and practice in HRD. (The papers contain reference sections.) (MN/CG)

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Theory Building Research in HRD--Pushing the Envelope!

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The purpose of this innovative session is to foster a community of scholars interested in the advancement of theory building research in human resource development.

Keywords: HRD Theory, Theory Building

The Human Resource Development (HRD) profession is on the verge of a significant theory building thrust. A 1998 AHRD theory symposium titled, "The Discipline of Human Resource Development," attracted about 60 participants, many of whom have continued the dialogue and produced numerous publications. That symposium presented three espoused theories underlying the discipline of HRD. This 2000 symposium will focus on theory building research methodologies appropriate for HRD as well as the practical consequences of research-based theory. Four related topics in the context of HRD will receive attention: the Role of Theory Building, Philosophy Building Research, Theory Building Research, and Practical Consequences of Sound Philosophy and Theory.

Role of Theory Building in HRD

We develop theories because aspects of the real world are so complex that they need to be conceptually simplified in order to be understood (Dubin, 1976). A well-constructed theory gives clarity to a complex phenomenon by providing a system for understanding its core ideas and interrelationships. For this reason, a simple, elegant theory that makes real world phenomena comprehensible is desired over a complex, elaborate theory. These fundamental assumptions provide the basis for a discussion among innovative session participants.

Philosophy Building Methodology for HRD

The philosophical framework for HRD consists of three key components:

1. Ontology: the component that makes explicit the commonly held view of the nature of the world and phenomena of HRD (how we see our world);
2. Epistemology: the component that makes explicit the commonly held nature of knowledge in HRD, and the necessary and sufficient requirements to hold and claim knowledge in our field (how we think about our world);
3. Axiology: the component that makes explicit the commonly held view of how we ought to act in our field, our espoused aims, ideals and proper methodologies and methods for HRD inquiry and practice (how we should and actually act in research and practice).

These three components interact in a dynamic and systemic way, together forming the guiding framework for a congruent and coherent system of thought (Bohm, 1994) and practice in the HRD field.
There is an interactive and dynamic relationship among the key components integral to a sound philosophical framework for research and practice in HRD.

Although often thought of as a discipline of abstract thought with little practical utility, philosophy can play a very useful and purposeful role in HRD. To get a sense of this potential utility one needs to consider philosophy

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as a system of thought and action (Bohm, 1985). That is as an activity or process of inquiry that is concerned with disciplined reflection, ways of thinking about certain questions, interpreting texts, trying out ideas and thinking of possible arguments for and against them, and wondering about how concepts really work.

Philosophy helps develop capacities for thinking (Honderich, 1995). At the heart of it, philosophy is a systematic examination of the assumptions that underlie action. It is not studied for the answers it provides, but for the questions it raises. Theories-in-use are investigated and analyzed to surface the essences of our thoughts and ideas that, ultimately, drive our actions. Magee (1971) told us that "one of the tasks of philosophy is mapping the logic of... discourse, laying it out, so to speak, so that a person can make his way about it successfully" (p. 45). Philosophy presents thought and action in an integrated, interactive system.

In fulfilling this role, it affords practice in criticism— for example, building counter arguments to common wisdoms (Root, 1993) and developing examples for questionable generalizations. It also develops responsiveness to concrete cases and an appreciation of the thinking expressed in these. Finally, it enables interpretation and theorizing, for example, by relating positions of one area of inquiry to those in another.

Philosophy thus provides us with practical ways of thinking about certain sorts of questions (questions of the nature of reality, truth and ethics) and the use of logical argument, disciplined reflection and theoretical reasoning in this questioning process. It helps us develop the practice of rational critical thinking about things concerning the nature of the world, justification of beliefs, and the conduct of life. Philosophy engages us in the interpretation of texts and the criticisms of common wisdoms that are often taken for granted.

Implications for practice.

Reflection about philosophy (ontology, epistemology,axiolgy) ensures that as practitioners we are leading a worthy "examined life"— acknowledging that beliefs about basic ends and principles lead to concrete conclusions and action. This process can be done unconsciously where it is subject to many hazards. Or, it can be done consciously where one (or an entire field) strives for clarification and alignment. This is not to say that this clarification process is ever finished-- it is a continual process where "new light is always dawning on the meaning of concepts at every level, with the consequence that the whole enterprise has to be forever examined" (Magee, 1971, p. 47).

However, striving for alignment between the key components of philosophy and being grounded in those articulated by the discipline of HRD will undoubtedly result in better and more consistent practice. This is especially relevant in HRD, an applied field driven by its practice, where theory sometime lags behind the challenges being faced in organizations. Philosophy provides some structure on which to make decisions when research is not there to support a practice or policy. Magee (1971) identified the importance of philosophy to complement science when he explained:

> Conclusions about what to do is a mixture of judgements about the "excellencies to be produced" combined with empirical or scientific knowledge about how to produce them. It is important to notice that we cannot derive the list of prescriptions, excellencies, that are a set of value judgements about what to do, from the descriptive, empirical, knowledge accounts of what the facts usually are. It is, in short, not possible to go directly from scientific understanding to policy and practice. Practice is always a combination of prescriptive convictions and descriptive understanding. (p. 46)

The logic of philosophy allows us to engage in thinking that is at once disciplined and imaginatively creative. We are able to apply philosophical methods to practical problems and ascertain what the issues are and how different assumptions affect the problem. In addition, we can use philosophy to analyze and interpret practice. In these ways the idealism of philosophy can be used to improve practical problems. The act of philosophy cultivates the capacities and appetite for reflection, for exchange and debate of ideas, for life-long learning, and for dealing with problems for which there are no easy answers.

Implications for research and theory-building.

Research and theory-building are only parts of an overall context that drives HRD. How we see the world and what we recognize as knowledge in HRD fundamentally affects the methodologies we employ to research and build theory. A too limited view of ontology and epistemology can limit the scope and utility of HRD. A too broad view can lead to the slippery slope of relativism where there are few standards. Philosophy ultimately requires us to

consider what knowledge and theory really are. When placed within a context of assumptions about reality and nature our current views of these things may or may not change. Marsick (1990) stated:

> ...if we are to describe accurately and explain the world we research, then, as we work we must test our assumptions about what we view as knowledge, whether our view is compatible with the nature of organizations and the phenomena we are researching, and how we believe we should go about researching these phenomena. (p. 33)

It is important to acknowledge how science and philosophy complement one another and proceed on a journey that demands work in both areas from HRD scholars. Philosophy is not more or less important than science, it is just different. While science tells us what the world contains, philosophy asks about different ways to classify these things. While science produces knowledge, philosophy asks what we can know and how. While science provides new knowledge of the observable based on experimental tests, philosophy suggests "rules" for the stuff of reality and how it is organized. Philosophy looks behind science and analyzes concepts/notions and methods that are used. It pushes a discipline such as HRD to strive for even more than good research. In this way, philosophy may suggest important standards of rigor for research and theory building that have yet to be considered.

Implications for Evolution of HRD

Philosophy also plays an important role in the future of HRD. HRD continues to deal with perennial issues that threaten its stability and future effectiveness. One such issue is the purpose of HRD that has been extensively discussed during the last five years. Philosophy provides a framework for articulating the purpose of the field. Surfacing and clarifying key assumptions about ontology, in particular, provides a set of criteria to guide future discussions of what is and isn't HRD. We can analyze different schools of thought emerging in HRD (i.e. performance, learning, integrity) to see where they come together and where they do not. Philosophy can be a rigorous backdrop for judging whether and to what extent the field can accommodate multiple definitions and purposes. This same set of criteria can also be used to balance the long- and short-term interests of HRD— helping us to do both for the optimization of the field. Philosophy can be an important mechanism to guide the nature of conversations that need to continually be held in HRD. This will enhance the mature growth of HRD.

Theory Building Methodology for HRD

The process of theory development itself has been discussed in the context of theory building as a research method for HRD (Torraco, 1997). Torraco emphasized the important roles theory serves, especially in applied disciplines like HRD. He reviewed several methodologies for theory building, including the theory building models of Dubin (1978), Snow (1973) and Weick (1989). Case study research and grounded theory were also discussed as valuable resources for theory building in HRD. Torraco observed that the richness and complexity of the organizational contexts served by HRD require theory-based interventions guided by insights from grounded theory and case study research.

Weinberger (1998) reviewed commonly held theories of HRD including learning theory, organizational learning, the learning organization, the theory of performance improvement, systems theory, and economic theory. Holton (1999) proposed a taxonomy of performance improvement domains and characterized HRD's unique capabilities for "whole systems performance improvement. Swanson (1999) framed the discipline of HRD within the context of performance improvement in his discussion of the context of HRD work. He suggested component theories for HRD and a research agenda to advance the theory base of HRD for performance improvement. Lamenting the current state of performance improvement practice that Swanson sees as experiencing a "theory application deficit disorder," he offered the domains of economics, psychology and systems theory as the appropriate components of theory development of HRD for performance improvement.

Theorists must rely on both their theory building and domain-specific expertise to develop the concepts and interconnecting matrices that constitute theory. Yet, the literature available to guide theorists on methods of theory building is sparse and uneven. How does the theorist know which theory building methodology to use? In the following sections, positivistic theory-building methods, case study approaches to theory-building, and grounded theory are discussed as alternative methodologies for theory building. A discussion will be facilitated to allow session participants to discuss the domain (content area) of theory building they are interested in and to match their theory-building research objectives with the appropriate theory-building methodology.

Theory-building Methods.

Kaplan (1964) discussed theory building as a vehicle for the advancement of knowledge in any discipline where knowledge growth occurs both by intention and by extension. Knowledge growth by intention occurs when a partial explanation of a whole domain is made more and more complete. Early theories explain key portions of the domain, and, in doing so, highlight the need for subsequent theories. Knowledge growth in the domain is likened to gradually adding light to a dark room or bringing a microscopic field into sharper focus. In the field of HRD, knowledge growth by intention is occurring in organization development (OD), which was once based almost exclusively on "normative-reeducative" change strategies and group process interventions. The demands of today's business environment require OD to further integrate its therapeutic intervention model and normative perspective with a realistic human resource investment perspective. The theory base of OD is expanding to provide a broader foundation for the strategic value of OD (Beer & Walton, 1990).

Knowledge growth by extension occurs when a relatively complete explanation of a particular domain is then carried over and to applied to adjoining domains. A metaphor for theory building by extension is the creation of a mural scene by scene. The development and application of general systems theory to a wide range of professional disciplines illustrates this type of knowledge growth. Originally developed by the German biologist von Bertalanffy (1950), general systems theory was then applied to the fields of economics (Boulding, 1956) and mathematics (Rapoport, 1956), later to the study of organizations (Katz and Kahn, 1968) and human performance technology (Gilbert, 1978), and recently to field of HRD (Jacobs, 1989).

Snow (1973) offered a three-phase, process model for theory building. Patterned after an early model for describing the operation of human memory, Snow's model is composed of: (a) recognizing metaphors, (b) constructing *models*, and (c) organizing metatheories. The initial, loose conceptions of the theorist (metaphors) are further developed into formal representations (models) that are presented in graphic-pictorial, geometric, or symbolic-mathematical form. A metatheory develops as one or more successful models in the same area become widely confirmed and accepted as accurate descriptions of important phenomena. Snow applied his theory building model to research on teaching. Using his three-phase model to build a theory of teaching, Snow identified the Bayesian sheepdog as a metaphor for the teacher's role in guiding the direction and development of a "flock" of students. The metaphor was further developed into an analytical model of key teacher-student interactions while maintaining the image of teacher as shepherd. Snow suggested that this evolving theory of teaching might become incorporated into a grander metatheory of teaching through integration with existing theories of behaviorism, instructional design, and human problem solving. Snow's three phases of theory building were used to model the role of a teacher, thus explaining and clarifying sophisticated classroom interactions.

Snow defined metatheories as families or categories of theories that arise when an original theory stimulates further research leading to descendent and derivative theories that apply to the same domain. Metatheories become foundational structures upon which individual related theories can be built. Metatheories of interest to HRD that have given rise to related theories include learning theory, psychoanalytic theory, human capital theory, and general systems theory.

Weick (1989) argued that high quality theories are created through "disciplined imagination" on the part of the theorist. The inadequacy of theories in organizational studies has resulted, according to Weick, from the inability of theorists to accurately represent the process of theorizing. Weick characterizes theory building as disciplined imagination, "where the 'discipline' in theorizing comes from the consistent application of selection criteria to trial-and-error thinking and the 'imagination' in theorizing comes from deliberate diversity introduced into the problem statement, thought trials, and selection criteria that comprise that thinking" (p. 516). Theories of higher quality are produced when theorists pay particular attention to three aspects of theory building: (a) accurate statements of the problem to be addressed by the theory are specified, (b) many diverse conjectures about how to solve the problem are offered, and (c) a large number of diverse criteria for selecting among these conjectures are applied. By elaborating on what the theorist actually does in working through the problem statement, thought trials, and selection criteria needed for theory building, Weick adds clarity and structure to the nebulous process of theory building.

More so than any of the theory building strategies discussed so far, Dubin's (1978) eight-phase methodology for theory building lays out an explicit roadmap for the theorist to follow. The methodology offered by Dubin, a well known writer on theory and theory building, is frequently used as a template for building theories in the behavioral sciences. The eight phases of theory building are: (1) units (i.e., concepts) of the theory, (2) laws of interaction (among the concepts), (3) boundaries of the theory (the boundaries within which the theory is expected to apply), (4) system states of the theory (conditions under which the theory is operative), (5) propositions of the theory (logical deductions about the theory in operation), (6) empirical indicators (empirical measures used to

make the propositions testable), (7) hypotheses (statements about the predicted values and relationships among the units), and (8) research (the empirical test of the predicted values and relationships). The first five phases of the methodology represent the theory building component of Dubin's model, and the last three phases represent the process of taking the theory into real world contexts to conduct empirical research. Although theorists must consider the entire scope of Dubin's model for effective theory building, theory building and empirical research are often separated, and each of these is conducted as a distinct research effort.

The theory that emerges is not seen as the discovery of some preexisting reality "out there." Theory is considered an interpretation, and is, therefore limited in both a temporal and contextual sense. Theory grounded in practice can never be established forever, and its validity is eroded as contemporary social reality changes. These limitations notwithstanding, such grounded theory can provide concise theoretical formulations for the complex phenomena encountered in organizations.

Practical Consequences of Research-based HRD Theory

Practical consequences of sound HRD theory are the true motivation for the pursuit of theory-building research. Having said this, the popular notion of philosophy and theory being disconnected from practical matters continues to this day. Within HRD there is an overt resistance to specifying its theory beyond personally held values and truisms. HRD is a profession rift with gimmicks and exaggerated claims (Swanson, 1997). Edward O. Wilson, renowned scholar, informed us ".... that new ideas are commonplace, and almost always wrong. Most flashes of insight lead nowhere and statistically have a half-life of hours or maybe days (1998, p. 55). "Nothing in science--nothing in life, for that matter-- makes sense without theory (Wilson, 1998, p. 52)."

While theories are initially a product of human imagination, the practical consequences of research-based theory, according to Wilson (1998), are focused on the following practical factors:

1. Repeatability: the same phenomenon is confirmed or discarded.
2. Economy: information that is both simple and aesthetically pleasing.
3. Mensuration: using accepted scales, generalizations about the phenomenon are rendered unambiguous.
4. Heuristics: new knowledge initiates further discovery and provides additional test of the original principles.
5. Consilience: explanations of phenomena most likely to survive as a result of their connection to and consistency with other phenomena.

HRD, as an applied discipline, presents the demand of connecting theory and practice. As an applied discipline, HRD also recognizes that the contributions of practice and development efforts to HRD theory as well as contributions from research (Swanson, 1997). Swanson refers to this relationship as a Theory-Research-Development-Practice Cycle "that allows ideas to be progressively refined as they evolve from concepts to practices and practice to concepts" (1997, p. 13).

Conclusion

The very best community of HRD scholars interested in advancing the theory in the profession would be logically made up of theory building researchers and reflective practitioners. As an applied discipline, HRD has many practitioners and developers capable of serving as partners in advancing the theory of HRD. It would also seem logical that the Academy of Human Resource Development could serve as the catalysts and host to such a continuing effort.

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The Role of Theory Building in Maturing the Human Resource Development Profession

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Theory building and theory building research is starting to draw increased attention among Human Resource Development (HRD) scholars. There is a growing recognition of the importance of theory building in maturing thought and practice in HRD. Through a synthesis of existing theory building literature and a discussion of the core concepts, issues and challenges associated with theory building in an applied field, this article draws attention to the need to develop and understand what makes for good theory and theory building research in HRD. It further highlights the importance of embracing multi-paradigm research perspectives for stepping up to the task of theory building in the HRD profession.

Keywords: Applied Theory, Theory Building Research, Theory Building Methodology.

Human Resource Development (HRD) is concerned with practice. Thus, conversations in the field often focus on the How rather than probing for deeper understanding of the What and the Why of the phenomena of HRD (Chalofsky, 1996; Ruona & Lynham, 1999). Theory building research in HRD is essential for addressing some recurring conversational problems in the profession. Theory building research can not only help HRD address the call for HRD theory, but it also offers a means for stepping up to the perennial problems in HRD practice, many of which are amenable to being solved through theory.

It is the purpose of this paper to consider the importance, challenges and task of theory building in maturing the HRD profession. This topic is presented in four parts: a general introduction to theory building in HRD; a synthesis from the literature of what we do and do not appear to know about theory building in HRD; a presentation of key challenges relating to applied theory building in HRD; and, an overview of concluding implications and next steps for HRD in rising to the task of theory building research and development.

A General Introduction to Theory Building in HRD

A review of the existing body of knowledge on theory building in HRD reveals a limited number of articles on the topic. This topic has only begun to draw attention in HRD since the early 1990's and somewhat increasingly so since 1996. It appears that authors outside of HRD were the first to attend to the topic of theory building, the most noteworthy of whom include Dubin (1976, 1978) from industrial psychology, Hearn (1958) from social work studies, Reynolds (1971) and Cohen (1991) from sociology, Patterson (1986) from social psychology, and Bacharach (1989), Gioia & Pitre (1990), Eisenhardt (1989), Van de Ven (1989) and others from organizational studies.

Within HRD there are a small number of authors who have started to turn their attention to theory building, most notably, Chalofsky (1998), Hansen (1998), Hardy (1999), Hatcher (1999), Marsick (1990), Mott (1998), Ruona & Lynham (1999), Shindell (1999), Swanson & Holton (1997), and Torraco (1997). There is also evidence that a monograph on *Systems Theory in HRD,* edited by Deanne Gradous in 1989, played an important role in sparking attention to theory building in HRD. Given the above history one must ask why theory building is important to the maturing of the HRD profession. However, to set a useful context for this discussion, some key concepts and terms associated with theory building first require clarification.

Core Theory Building Terms and Concepts

According to Thomas (1997) the concept of *theory* is defined in almost as many ways as there are authors on the topic. Dubin (1978) defined theory as "the attempt of man [sic] to model some theoretical aspect of the real world" (p. 26). This definition was refined by Torraco (1997) for the purposes of describing theory in the context of HRD: "Theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works" (p. 115). Dubin (1976) stated that the purpose of theory "is to make sense of the observable world by ordering the relationships among elements that

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constitute the theorist's focus of attention in the real world" (p. 26). Bacharach (1989) offered a similar definition, describing theory as a "statement of relationships between units observed or approximated in the empirical world" (p. 496). Senge (1994) described theory as "a fundamental set of propositions about how the world works, which has been subject to repeated tests and in which we have gained some confidence" (p. 29). The definition of theory to be used for purposes of this discussion is based on one offered byGioia and Pitre (1990), namely, that *theory is a coherent description, explanation and representation of observed or experienced phenomena* . Although the term Coherent, used in this definition, may not appear to convey an adequate standard of rigor in theory, it needs to suffice until some of the discussions of theory building research method and guiding philosophy have been discussed and agreed in HRD. The choice of definition of a theory is a fundamental issue in theory building.

Theory building is the process of building theory and is informed and influenced by ones' view or definition of theory. Torraco (1997) provided a crisp description of theory building as "the process of modeling real-world phenomena" (p. 126). Building off these definitions, theory building will be taken to be *the process or recurring cycle by which coherent descriptions, explanations and representations of observed or experienced phenomena, are generated, verified and refined*.

The *product or intended outcome* of theory building is, according to Dubin (1976), twofold: (1) outcome knowledge in the form of, for example, explanation and predictive knowledge, and (2) process knowledge, in the form of increased understanding of how something works. Reynolds (1971) suggested that theory and theory building should meet as many of the following goals of science as possible: (a) to provide a typology (a means of classification), (b) to be useful for explanation and prediction (of phenomena), (c) to provide a sense of understanding (of the phenomenon being studied), and (d) if possible, to enable control of the phenomenon. It must be noted that both the perspectives of Reynolds and Dubin are informed by a specific philosophy of the nature of scientific knowledge.

Another important term is that of *a knowledge base*. This term can be understood as *the collection and integrated system of intellectual and practical concepts, components, principles, theories and practices that undergird and form the foundations of a discipline or field of study and practice* . A knowledge base defines the unique body of knowledge and thus the boundaries of knowledge for thought and practice in a field (Chalofsky, 1998; Passmore, 1997).

A last term crucial for clarification is that of *research*. The terms of research and theory go hand-in-hand in the theory building literature and warrant distinction. For purposes of this discussion, research will be taken to mean *"scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry; close and careful study"* (Swanson, 1997, p. 10). As Swanson (1988) pointed out, the product of research is new knowledge, but the process of research may or may not be one of theory building. Thus, research can result in new knowledge in the form of theory, but theory is only one form of new knowledge produced by research. Other forms, for instance, include problem solving methods to improve practice and the discovery of new organizational, social and human phenomena.

Having clarified some key terms pertaining to this discussion, it is appropriate to turn to the question of the importance of theory building in an applied field (i.e., a field concerned with application). HRD is one such field.

The Importance of Theory Building in HRD

Theory building is important to the HRD profession for a number of reasons. A discussion of each of these points of importance follows.

To Advance Professionalism and Maturity in HRD. Good HRD theory is practical because it advances the development of knowledge in HRD, guides research towards critical questions in HRD, and enlightens the worth of HRD (Van de Ven, 1989). Many scholars in the field believe that the development of good theory in HRD is essential for the maturation and professionalization of HRD (Chalofsky, 1998; Hatcher, 1999; Marsick, 1990; 1998; Mott, 1998; Swanson & Holton, 1997; Torraco, 1997).

In explicit support of the above, Torraco (1997) drew our attention to a number of roles that are played by theory and, by association, theory building (for example, interpreting new data, and defining boundaries). Each of these roles is important in guiding HRD research and practice and in advancing the HRD profession as a whole, an emphasis that is supported by Bacharach (1989), Dubin (1976) and Van de Ven (1989).

Because HRD is a relatively young profession, the issue of theory building has only recently received attention and emphasis by HRD scholars (Marsick, 1990). At the heart of the attention to theory building in HRD is the drive for more rigorous HRD research and theory. This is fueled by an increasing concern over building evidence of atheoretical practice or "practice that occur without the guidance of theory" (Swanson, 1997, p. 4), as well as ascientific theory in HRD, or theory building and research that occurs without the guidance of scientific discipline or rigor (Chalofsky, 1998; Dubin, 1976; Passmore, 1990; Swanson & Holton, 1997). It is, however,

generally recognized in the literature that the development of good HRD theory and theory building methods are essential for advancing maturity, credibility and professionalism of both thought and practice in HRD.

To Dissolve the Tension between HRD Research and Practice. Because HRD is of an applied nature there is a tension between HRD researchers and practitioners. As a result of this tension, the output of knowledge in HRD is judged primarily by its usefulness in practice, a judgement that is generally executed by HRD practitioners. On the other hand, the standards of research and theory (and theory building) in HRD seem to fall more under the charter of the HRD researcher, who is judged more by rigor than relevance (Marsick, 1990). This has resulted in an increasing tension and dilemma between research and practice, between the HRD researcher and the HRD practitioner – a tension further typified by what Van de Ven (1989) described as validity versus usefulness.

Numerous scholars in the field have expressed the need for a closer partnering between researchers and practitioners in HRD. This call for researcher-practitioner partnering is perceived as a way to step up to the challenges of professionalizing and maturing the HRD field and to get HRD practitioners more involved in and committed to contributing their practical knowledge and experience to the recognized knowledge base of HRD. Researcher-practitioner partnering is also perceived as a way to get HRD researchers to ensure that the output of their theories and research is more directly applicable to effectiveness in the field. This partnering ensures that HRD research and theory are useful to HRD practice.

To Develop Multiple, Inclusive Methods of Research for Theory Building and Practice in HRD. A common complaint by HRD practitioners is the inaccessibility to the results of research. HRD research is criticized by practitioners for being not understandable and/or published in inaccessible journals and periodicals (Chalofsky, 1998). What's more, according to the reportedly dominant positivistic paradigm of research in HRD (Hardy, 1999; Marsick, 1990; Mott, 1998; Passmore, 1990; Swanson, 1997; Torraco, 1997), research and the production of knowledge are perceived to be reserved for the scholar with an underlying assumption that it cannot be done well by the practitioner. There are, however, some solutions to this apparent false assumption.

Other authors of theory building in an applied field (for example, Bacharach, 1989; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Van de Ven, 1989) have indicated that theory can be built from multiple perspectives, paradigms or worldviews of knowledge. According to these authors, when theory is perceived and built from multiple research perspectives, the results are a more comprehensive, inclusive and complete view of human/social and organizational phenomena. A multi-paradigm view of knowledge production is more conducive to assumptions of alternative research paradigms, to the multifaceted nature of human and organizational realities, and to the constantly transforming contexts of human and organizational reality (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

It has also been suggested that theory can be developed from multiple domains of HRD. Swanson (1997) proposed a Research-Practice-Development-Theory Cycle that shows how theory can flow from research, development and practice. This Cycle is of both an epistemological (nature of knowledge) and ontological (nature of reality) nature and encourages HRD to entertain multiple paradigms/perspectives of building knowledge and theory in HRD. Given the reported dominance of a positivistic research paradigm in HRD (Chalofsky, 1998; Marsick, 1990; Mott, 1998: Torraco, 1997), the absence of clear definitions of theory, and the lack of multi-paradigm methods of theory building, it is not surprising that it is currently difficult to integrate knowledge that comes from HRD development and practice with that from HRD research. Like Swanson, Gioia & Pitre (1990), Hansen (1998), Hardy (1999), Marsick (1990), Mott (1998), and Torraco (1997) have also made compelling arguments for the use of alternative, inclusive paradigms in HRD research and theory building.

So far general consideration has been given to the issue of theory building in HRD It would next seem appropriate to consider, from the related and available literature, what we do and do not appear to currently know about theory building in HRD.

A Synthesis and Discussion of the Literature: Core Knowns and Unknowns about Theory Building in HRD

This section provides a synthesis of the core knowns and unknowns in HRD theory building knowledge together with some implications for the job of theory building and theory building research in HRD. Being clear about what is known about theory building can help HRD professionals to bound the existing body of theory building knowledge, as well as to identify areas of future research and inquiry needed to develop this expertise and body of knowledge.

Core Knowns about Theory Building in HRD

From available and related literature it is evident that there are a number of things that are known about theory building in applied fields, like HRD.

1. What everyone calls *theory* is not necessarily theory. It is clear from the literature that there are as many definitions of theory as there are authors on the topic. A comparative analysis of definitions of the concept of theory, conducted by Thomas (1997), pointed to a definite lack of consensus on the meaning of the word. This lack of clarity on the meaning of theory is problematic in that it fuels confusion, disagreement and disconnect between HRD researchers and practitioners on what makes for theoretically sound HRD thought and practice.

2. Without exception, authors in this area agree that theory and theory building are very important in guiding the practice of HRD and in advancing the HRD profession as a whole (Bacharach, 1989; Chalofsky, 1998; Dubin, 1976; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Hardy, 1999; Hatcher, 1999; Marsick, 1990; Mott, 1998; Passmore, 1997; Ruona & Lynham, 1999; Swanson & Holton, 1997; Torraco, 1997; Van de Ven, 1989).

3. There are a number of different opinions and beliefs among HRD scholars about the most appropriate methods for theory building in HRD (Hansen, 1998; Marsick, 1990; Mott, 1998; Torraco, 1997). In spite of these differences in opinion, HRD scholars writing on the issue have demonstrated an open encouragement of using multiple, inclusive methods for research and theory building in HRD. They appear to see this as a positive rather than a negative move in the field, calling into question the future dominance of a positivistic paradigm for research in HRD.

4. The relevant literature reveals that there are different paradigms for building theory in a field, and that these paradigms rest on different ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of phenomena and the output and purpose of knowledge in a field (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Gioia & Pitre, 1990). In other words, decisions of theory building research and methods are guided by deeply held, philosophically-laden assumptions about the nature of reality, phenomena and knowledge (Chalofsky, 1998; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Marsick, 1990; Ruona & Lynham, 1999).

5. From the literature, and particularly from the insights offered by Torraco (1997), it is clear that other than for the hypothetico-deductive method of theory building (offered by Hearn, 1958; Dubin, 1976; Reynolds, 1971; and Cohen, 1991), there is a substantial lack of explicit theory building methods for use in HRD. While Eisenhardt (1989) and Stake (1994) proposed methods of theory building from case studies, Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Strauss & Corbin (1990) argued for grounded theory, Van Manen (1990) for interpretive theory, and Marsick (1990) and Mott (1998) for action learning theory, the actual theory building processes they use and propose are difficult for the HRD researcher to access and replicate, let alone for the HRD practitioner to utilize and therefore contribute back to the HRD body of knowledge.

6. It is also known that theory building in an applied field causes tension between the HRD researcher and the HRD practitioner (Dubin, 1978). This tension is further aggravated by the building evidence of both atheoretical practice and ascientific research that has characterized the HRD field over the past few years. Both Chalofsky (1998) and Dubin (1978) informed us that it takes between five and ten years from the time a theoretical model becomes credible and validated to its utilization by HRD practitioners. This time lag results in day-to-day HRD practice being informed and driven by ideas and opinions cloaked as new theories, rather than by emerging research and theory building (Chalofsky, 1998).

7. The literature indicates that theory and theory building play a number of pertinent roles in guiding research and practice, and in advancing the HRD profession as a whole (Torraco, 1997). As advancement of the HRD profession is desirable to both HRD researchers and practitioners, attention to the issues and roles of good theory and theory building would seem pertinent to the field.

8. The focus of theory and theory building in an applied field is to be informed, guided and judged by practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Dewey, 1933; Dubin, 1978; Jacobs, 1997, 1999; Lewin, 1951). Although this applied focus does not mean that the utility of HRD theory is to be judged solely by HRD practitioners, the emphasis on practice and application of HRD theory demands a working relationship and partnership between HRD researchers and practitioners.

The above points provide a synthesis of what appears to be known about theory building in HRD. It is important to consider some of the voids, or unknowns, in the knowledge of theory building in HRD.

Some Voids in the Knowledge of Theory Building in HRD

Because theory building has only recently come to the forefront among HRD scholars, there are a number of voids in this body of knowledge. Three compelling voids concerning our knowledge of theory building in HRD warrant specific attention. A brief discussion of each follows.

1. The lack of a philosophical framework to guide theory and practice in HRD. Marsick (1990), Mott (1998) and Chalofsky (1998), three thought provoking authors on theory building research in HRD, pointed to the need for clarity around the assumptions that underlie the paradigms used to identify, refine, research and solve problems in HRD. None of them, however, provides clarification for addressing this difficult task, and their conversations appear stuck at a research methods level and in methodological dilemmas of relevance versus rigor, or validity versus utility (Ruona & Lynham, 1999). Gradous (1989) lent us the wisdom of jumping to a larger frame of the system-in-focus to dissolve this methodological dilemma (supported by Gioia & Pitre, 1990). It would be prudent, therefore, to step up the dialogue to include the challenge of clarifying and agreeing on the philosophical underpinnings needed to guide the thought and practice of HRD. In debating methods of research and practice in HRD, we are simultaneously compelled to grapple with the notion of what makes for sound knowledge in HRD. This multi-dimensional dialogue is certainly necessary if HRD is to rise to the task and challenge of rigorous *and* relevant theory building.

2. The absence of well researched, tested, and explicit theory building methodologies. Methods of theory building that enable us to develop theory from multiple research paradigms are not readily available to HRD professionals (instead they seem to be embedded in research areas outside of mainstream HRD). As a result, more rigorous inquiry into the nature of theory building methodologies for use in HRD is required. Theory building methodologies that build and foster the necessary partnering between researchers and practitioners to ensure useful HRD theory are needed. Clearly the literature in the field of organizational theory offers some rich insights and learning for HRD in this regard. However, until these theory building research methodologies are tried, tested, and made available to HRD researchers and practitioners, it is unlikely that rigorous, valid or useful theories will be developed to guide and inform HRD professionals.

3. The lack of shared and common understanding of the core concepts of *theory and theory building*, and an absence of corresponding standards by which to guide and judge good theory. A common, shared understanding of these core concepts is a necessary condition for establishing what makes for good theory and theory building research methods in HRD.

From both the general introduction to theory building and theory building research in HRD, as well as the synthesis and discussion of available literature, it is evident that a number of changes in the conceptualization and practice of the HRD profession are needed. However, in order to make these necessary changes, the profession will need to step up to some key challenges related to applied theory building.

Two Key Challenges of Theory Building in an Applied Field/Profession

Challenge One: Dealing with the Researcher-Practitioner Relationship

The phrase *there is nothing more practical than a good theory* was coined by Lewin in 1933 and epitomizes the nature of theory building in an applied field. The concern for application, according to Dubin (1976), changes the emphasis among the various aspects of theory building. He stressed that a particular concern in building applied theory is that of the practitioners who expect to use the theory and who usually play a crucial role in defining the content of the theoretical model to be developed. Dubin clearly suggested that research and theorizing in an applied context is done with the explicit intent that the results affect and improve conditions in the field.

The ultimate judge of *good theory* in an applied field is primarily through practice. This adjudicating role of praxis demands that the researcher develop a deep understanding of the recursive nature of inductive and deductive processes in theory building (to ensure optimum connectivity between abstractions and the real world). It also demands that the researcher partner closely with the practitioner in terms of how the problem gets defined and how the empirical indicators used to test the theory are defined and selected. This praxis emphasis also requires that the practitioner be patient with the researcher/theorist in the theory building process. If the researcher is not able or permitted to build theory through the application of required and rigorous process, then the outcome of the theory is unlikely to meet the demands of relevance common among the practitioner.

In an applied field it is important to bear in mind that the practitioner needs to be afforded the responsibility of exerting constant pressure on the theorist for the purpose of ensuring that HRD theory meets the test of HRD application. "For when it does we have a fruitful interplay between practitioner and theorist"(Dubin, 1976, p. 39).

Challenge Two: Recognizing the Value of Multiple Theory Building Research Paradigms

Although there are a limited number of scholars in the area of applied theory building it is clear from the literature that theory building can be conducted from multiple research perspectives. To date, however, most of the theory building methodologies/approaches made explicit by HRD and business and education professionals tend to be of a positivistic nature (Chalofsky, 1996; Gioia & Pitre 1990; Hardy, 1999; Marsick, 1990; Mott, 1998; Shindell, 1999; Torraco, 1997; Van de Ven, 1989). Gioia and Pitre (1990) reported that commonly known theory building approaches are not entirely consistent with the assumptions of alternative research paradigms now assuming prominence in organizational and social studies. They further argued that the use of any one single research paradigm promotes too narrow a view to reflect the multi-faceted nature of organizational and human reality.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) offered a useful matrix of four different research paradigms, namely, that of the functionalist, the interpretivist, the radical humanist, and the radical structuralist. To put this matrix into a more commonly understood research framework, the functionalist paradigm corresponds with what Hultgren and Coomer (1989) described as positivistic/analytical research, the interpretivist paradigm with their description of interpretive research, and the radical humanist and radical structuralist paradigms with what they described as critical research. Adapted from the original schematic offered by Gioia and Pitre (1990), Table 1 offers a comparative clarification of some of the theory building paradigm concepts they presented and adds some general and HRD-related examples and references to these theory building paradigms.

Table 1. Four Key Research Paradigms Affecting Theory Building

Theory Building Concepts:	Regulation Research Paradigms		Radical Change Research Paradigms	
	1. Functionalist	2. Interpretivist	3. Radical Humanist	4. Radical Structuralist
Research Goal:	To search for regularities and test so as to predict and control.	To describe and explain so as to diagnose and understand.	To describe and critique so as to change (achieve freedom through revision of consciousness).	To identify sources of domination so as to persuade and guide revolutionary practices (achieve freedom through revision of structures).
Theory-Research Intent:	• Relationships • Causation • Generalization.	• Social construction of reality • Reification process • Interpretation.	• Social construction of reality distortion • Interests served.	• Domination • Alienation • Macro forces • Emancipation.
Theory Building Approaches:	• Refinement through causal analysis • Example: Hypothetico-deductive and Applied or particularized theory.	• Discovery through code analysis • Example: • Action and Feminist theory.	• Disclosure through critical analysis • Example: • Historical and Critical theory.	• Liberation through structural analysis • Example: • Marxist, Critical and Feminist theory.
Theory Building Goals:	• To write up results – to show how the theory is refined, supported, or disconfirmed; to show what it tells the scientific community and the practitioners.	• To write up a substantive theory – to show how it all fits together.	• To write up a dialectic analysis – to show how the level of consciousness should change.	• To write up a rhetorical analysis – to show how the praxis should change.
HRD-Related Example:	• Cause-and-effect theories of purposive behavior (e.g. motivational theory).	• Constructive theories of communication and learning (e.g. cognition and learning theories)	• Dialectic theories of critical change (e.g. critical research and change theory)	• Liberation or emancipatory theories of structural change (e.g. action research and systems theory)
HRD-Related Theory Building Reference Examples:	• Herzberg (1959,1966) • Dubin (1976,1978).	• Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998) • Argyris & Schon (1996).	• Lewin (1951) • Mezirow (1981).	• Von Bertalanffy (1968) • Katz & Kahn (1978).

Assumptions of the dominant functionalist (or positivistic) paradigm become problematic when dealing with subjective views of social and organizational phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia and Pitre, 1990). The need

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to accommodate the subjective nature of social and organizational phenomena is resulting in an increasing call from HRD scholars to question the general appropriateness of the dominance of the objective science research paradigm (Chalofsky, 1998; Lincoln, 1985; Marsick 1990; Mott, 1998; Thomas, 1997; Torraco, 1997; Van de Ven, 1989). There is, consequently, a paradoxical push towards paradigm-based theory building and a corresponding definition of theory that can entertain multiple research paradigms. As a result, theory building is becoming more about the search for comprehensiveness stemming from different worldviews than about the search for truth (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The push to study and understand organizational and human/social phenomena demands that the assumptions of multiple research paradigms be accepted and embraced in the process of developing the HRD body of knowledge. This, in turn, will enable multi-paradigm and inclusive research approaches to theory building in HRD, an approach to knowledge generation and building that is more likely to facilitate partnering between the HRD researcher and practitioner . Gioia and Pitre (1990) further pointed out that multi-paradigm approaches to theory building can not only generate a more complete body of knowledge, but that they imply a broadening of the concept of theory and of the theory building process itself. Both of these points are of worthy note for theory building in HRD.

Important Next Steps for the HRD Profession

This article has presented an in-depth analysis of the common knowledge of theory building in HRD. It has also highlighted the importance of theory building in the maturing of the profession together with two important challenges of theory building in an applied field like HRD. Given the focus and outcome of this inquiry, important next steps for the HRD profession need to be highlighted if HRD is to rise to the job of theory building research and development.

First, there is a need to recognize that sound theory and theory development is important to the maturity of HRD thought and practice. Second, there is a need to commit to conversations to agree to and clarify inclusive, multiple theory building research paradigms at a philosophical (ontological and epistemological) rather than just a methods level. Third, there is a need to conduct rigorous and relevant research to develop, and make explicit and available, multiple methods and paradigms of theory building to the HRD researcher and practitioner. Fourth, there is a need to begin to support theory building related efforts and studies in HRD. Although some of these studies may currently seem incomplete and perhaps more conceptual than operational, these pioneering steps of discovery and understanding need to be encouraged, supported and made explicit in the HRD body of knowledge. And fifth, there is a need to participate in symposia and forums to synthesize knowledge and efforts on theory building in HRD. One example may be regular Academy of HRD conference symposia on theory building. Others may include periodic inclusion of a special theory building forum section in key HRD journals and possibly a complete journal dedicated to building this body of knowledge in HRD.

Just stepping up to these few requirements will help to develop more good *and* useful HRD theory. Meeting these requirements will, in turn, help to make for more professional and mature thought and practice in HRD.

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